

Picture of a Man at Peace

After my father died my aunt Sheila the Matron sat him up in a rocker and had his picture taken. A strong woman, I remember she took him bodily from the bed, shunting his weight off her hip onto the cane-bottomed seat.

His feet looked like feathers brushing the carpet before she adjusted them, forcing them apart until his heels rested on the crossbar as if he had placed them there himself. He seemed to resist as she pushed his head to one side, the way he always grimaced when anyone tried to kiss him.

Except for Cousin Judy. Her he welcomed and let smooth his hair and never bit, even when she pried his lips open to look at his teeth which were incredibly strong and white till the day he passed. The rest of us he kept away from the money stashed under his pillow, snarling as the rheumatism took hold.

That's when Sheila came, in her retirement from the Princes Town Hospital, her needles blunt as screws, working them into his arms as I watched over her shoulder, wincing as he winced, magnified through her glasses, his skin folding under her bifocals, till he screamed, grown man in pain.

Beyond that now, he sat, as the photographer fixed the tripod, and went under the black cover to check the focus and the light. And I remember how Sheila made him wait while she adjusted my father's pajamas, and how in the snapshot (that I could only bear to look at once), they had come undone again.